Albany, Georgia walloped by coronavirus outbreak as governor refuses to implement state-wide stay at home order

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28 March 2020

Medical centers in southwest Georgia are reporting a shortage of intensive care unit (ICU) beds as hospitals reach overcapacity due to the massive influx of COVID-19 patients. Georgia now has the 11th highest number of cases in the United State with over 2000 confirmed infections and 64 reported deaths as of Friday.

Especially hard hit is the Phoebe Putney Health System which operates four hospitals in the cities of Albany, Americus and Sylvester. Albany, a city of 73,000 people, is the worst case, reporting a quarter of the state's coronavirus deaths.

An analysis by the *New York Times* found that the Albany area ranked second to the New York City metro region, the epicenter of the outbreak in the US, and ahead of New Orleans in the number of infections per capita. While New York recorded 2.15 cases for every 1,000 residents, Albany has 1.35 cases. New Orleans was just behind with 1.32 for every 1,000 residents.

Due to what the Georgia Department of Health is calling a "sustained community spread," employees of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been dispatched to Albany to study the local outbreak.

The Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital in Albany is running dangerously low on ICU beds as nearly all those available are filled with "critically ill patients" suffering from the worst cases of the COVID-19 virus. Twelve people had died from coronavirus there as of Wednesday afternoon.

On Thursday and Friday more than 40 member of the Georgia National Guard, mostly medics, nurses and doctors, were deployed to the hospital by Georgia Governor Brian Kemp to help meet the surging demand, bringing with them five ventilators, which are critical to saving the lives of those infected with COVID-19.

A local hotel has been used by the state to house those quarantined with the virus while 35 patients at the hospital have confirmed cases and 90 more await test results. In the area nearly 800 others have been tested but not hospitalized.

Since the beginning of this month the hospital has gone through six months of supplies in order to care for the influx of coronavirus patients who have flooded in. In order to make up for the devastating lack of personal protective equipment, staff members are reportedly sewing masks together out of surgical sheets. Nurses at the hospital were instructed to keep working if they test positive for COVID-19 as the system was so swamped with new cases there is a drastic lack of staff properly see after the new patients.

The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* has reported that Phoebe Putney hospital administrators have been forced to purchase supplies in "underground markets" in order to combat infections and protect staff.

It is clear, already early on in the state's outbreak, that more testing and more ICU beds are going to be necessary in order to slow the spread of the virus to the more populated areas of Georgia including Atlanta where Grady Memorial Hospital, Atlanta's largest public hospital is already "at or near capacity," a potentially devastating situation for the city's poor and uninsured.

While Dougherty County, where Albany is located, has issued a stay at home order for all residents, Governor Kemp has refused to issue a statewide shutdown of non-essential businesses, echoing statements made by President Donald Trump that the

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economic toll of doing so would be worse than the toll on human life.

Kemp asked Georgians to instead call out businesses and neighbors they see not practicing proper social distancing and to avoid businesses and restaurants that are not complying with social distance guidelines, encouraging people who are not “medically fragile” to continue going out.

The governor announced Thursday that schools would remain closed through April 24 though Kemp stopped short of canceling school until the end of the academic year as many other school systems in the region have done.

Epidemiologists have criticized Kemp for his lackluster response to the spread of the virus in his state and his reluctance to take more drastic measures to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

#AskGovKemp was a trending topic on Twitter in in the state Thursday night as citizens of the state expressed their dismay at the governor for refusing to expand Medicaid to cover medical costs for the infected or issue a statewide lockdown.

A local attorney and activist Gerald Griggs took to twitter to demand more action from the Governor, “As the cases continue to rise in Georgia with 105 of 159 counties with Covid-19 or coronavirus cases, we must really press the highest elected officials to do the right thing and shut it down now.”

Another Twitter user called out the governor on his page for not doing enough compared to similarly hit states, “why are we not on lockdown? Why do we have higher confirmed cases than other states with less resources but have not implemented shelter-in-place?”

For his part Kemp responded to growing criticism at his press conference Thursday, declaring, “I am trying to govern the whole state. We still have 50 counties that don’t have a confirmed case yet. We’re trying to balance that.” Meanwhile testing has been drastically short compared to the population of the state with less than 10,000 tested compared to the 5.3 million who live in Georgia.

Because of this, many workers are being forced to work in potentially dangerous conditions as their workplaces are continuing to operate amid the outbreak. Earlier this week in the town of Kathleen, an hour and half’s drive northeast of Albany, workers at a Perdue Farms chicken processing plant walked off in protest of the dangerous and unsanitary environment they are being forced to work under.

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